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The Arch Community School, St. Louis, MO

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Describe the site where you work.

The Arch Community School is located in the Promise Zone of St. Louis. The Promise Zone is defined as federally designated areas that were reviewed by representatives from several federal agencies and met qualifying criteria. These areas are defined as having high unemployment, high crime and mortality rates; significant numbers of vacant lots and abandoned buildings; and homelessness. It is reported that the poverty rate is at 63%, unemployment rate is 21%, 61% of families are rent burdened with over 30% of their income going towards rent, and the dropout rate is at 7%. Our school is in its inaugural year and is small with about 65 students enrolled and 4 grade levels from kindergarten to third grade. Most of our students have been in multiple schools in their short educational careers, therefore there are gaps in their educational and social/emotional learning and development. As a team we have worked hard to utilize the resources we already have and work with our sponsor, the University of Missouri St. Louis to pull in extra people and resources to better serve our school. One of the strongest partnerships we have is with Bethlehem Lutheran Church, the building we reside in. The church is heavily involved in the area and has helped us foster home-school collaboration and they provide after care for the whole school as well.

What are your areas of expertise at this point in your career?

I am in the earliest stages of my career and in my internship year. I have had previous practicum experiences last year in the diverse Pattonville School District as well as a job as a paraprofessional in the same district. My personal relationship skills have always been a strength for me and I have found that creating meaningful relationships with colleagues, parents, and students has been pivotal in my career thus far. My supervisor has guided me on utilizing my communication skills professionally to gain buy in from my colleagues, parents, and students. It has been a difficult learning

curve to find creative ways to collaborate with families and get them involved. As a school we rely heavily on the after school program to do most of the communication to parents. As a school psychologist I have realized that although it is difficult to get parent buy-in, it is integral for the students to succeed. Teaming to help students receive what they need to succeed is a passion of mine and I hope that I can continue to collaborate with professionals and grow my skills in this area.

How do you see yourself as an advocate for mental health services and/or for students in your placement and community?

There are multiple ways that I advocate for mental health services in my school. I came to this internship with some counseling experience in my course work but not any extensive training. I am thankful that as a charter school sponsored by the University of Missouri St. Louis, we have access to services and teams that are willing to partner with our school. In my role I am the only mental health provider because we do not have a counselor or social worker currently. I have worked closely with the consultant from UMSL to look closely at our funding and how we cleverly use our staff and resources. The CHADS coalition has been an essential component of social/emotional growth at our school. We currently have two mentors and one counselor who come in and provide services one day per week. I have worked closely with the counselor to gain skills and collaborate with teachers and myself to continue the lessons she does with the students when she is here. My skills have improved and the students are getting a more comprehensive counseling experience. CHADS has helped the school by providing other free services parents can access outside of school as well if they are in crisis or are in need of extra support. It is important to me that the parents feel supported as much as the students do because parenting is a hard job and we want the best outcomes for the whole family. I have been implementing the Second Steps social emotional curriculum since January in the kindergarten and first grade classrooms. This curriculum has fostered fun activities and productive conversations about emotions and breaking apart what the various emotions look like and how that can change the way you might treat someone. I am impressed with the growth I have seen from the children and the skills I have seen generalized outside of the lessons. The school is still extremely challenging and there is work to do, but we are starting to see small steps of progress.

Describe how you view your role as an advocate for students and the community you work in?

Due to my role as the only mental health professional in the school, I take my role as an advocate very seriously. I am the moderator for all services that push in to our school and I am in charge of communicating from the service providers to the staff and from the staff to the service providers. I am in charge of all consent and organization of which students receive which services and the time that the student receives those services. Missouri is still a state that uses the discrepancy model and with that it can be difficult to provide students with the most appropriate educational diagnosis. The majority of our students are dealing with past or present trauma in their lives. The research has shown that the number of traumatic experiences a person experiences is directly related to the struggles they may face in the future. It would be easy for me to label these students with an incorrect educational diagnosis based on the behaviors we see at school. I have teamed with colleagues to put effective practices in place to help students work through their emotions and cope in school rather than labeling them without intervention. The consultant for the University of Missouri of St. Louis has helped connect our school with a behavior specialist for a tier 3 behavior intervention room and school wide behavioral supports. I have collaborated with the behavioral specialist to facilitate school-wide behavior expectations and procedures and then take that information to the rest of the staff. I am the facilitator for these conversations among the staff and then I take those ideas and work with the behavior specialist to finalize the plans and expectations and help collect data. I am thankful for all of the support our school has had this year and I am hopeful that we will continue to refine our services.

Describe something that has surprised you about your career thus far.

I have been the most surprised at the emotional dysregulation of the students at my school. It has allowed me to view school from a different perspective. Tasks that seem easy such as sitting on the carpet, walking in a line, or ignoring other people are actually a difficult challenge for most of our students. It is impossible to break it down to simple cause and effect but I believe that trauma and technology are variables that impact their behaviors immensely. Based on observations of the children when parents are around, there is often a screen close by that they use for entertainment. I am realizing that this instant gratification is something that most children are facing. Teachers are having to become as entertaining as a tablet or phone and it is never going to happen. So often school has to be the 'bad guy' and teach children patience and breathing. Unfortunately due to the aggressive and explosive behaviors I have had to use my CPI training more than I would hope to do in my entire career. The thing that has surprised me the most has to be that the students that have fought the staff and myself the most have also shown the most love and appreciation in small moments. This work is hard work but giving those difficult kids a person that they know they can trust makes it all worth it.

What challenges have you faced in your early career, and how have you handled them?

I have faced many challenges in my early career, the main one being that I am working in a brand new school. I have been pushed physically, emotionally, and mentally in this job. The challenges have come from the daily struggle to regulate children and keep them safe when they are fighting each other, the teacher, or themselves. The level of noise from children upset, crying, and screaming has been exceptionally challenging when I am trying to test, write reports, or have meetings with parents. Due to the behavior challenges being significant I have also faced challenges of balancing behavior management with doing my job requirements. I think this work balance is a common struggle among school psychologists and too often the answer is piling on work at home to keep up with deadlines. We are supposed to be doing what is best for kids and families and often I am torn about what that means to me. I made some adjustments to my schedule to come in earlier and block out time with my supervisor that I devote all of my time to learning the technical parts of my job. It took me a couple of months to get a self care plan in place, but now I am hyper aware of how my body feels and then setting time aside from other activities to focus on me by either working out, cleaning, or doing some hands on activities. Sometimes this comes at the expense of sleep and sometimes this comes at the expense of family and friend time; but sacrificing that time to help me manage my stress level is worth it to me. I have helped myself the most by leaning on other professionals and not being afraid to ask for assistance with problem solving, behavioral strategies, or best practice questions.

What advice do you have for other early career school psychologists?

My best advice for other early career school psychologists is to put yourself first and do not try to do everything on your own. Focus on your problem solving model in the beginning of the year and try to stay away from helping out other teachers and staff. If I could have teamed up with colleagues and gotten these processes in place I believe we wouldn't have gone through such a difficult learning curve. Have a plan for the end of the day to help yourself get organized for the next day. That has helped me come in to work ready for any challenges that may happen because I am already prepared for my meetings and interventions. Lastly, remember to talk to students and spend time in classrooms, it will remind you why you got into the field and it will help form those relationships.

How has your NASP membership benefited you?

My NASP membership has helped me in more ways than I initially realized. I am so fortunate to have found NASP and been able to attend two conferences so far. Each year I attend, I meet people doing amazing things for the field, kids, and families! They give me the excitement to take some of their resources or skills back to my schools and make myself a better school psychologist. I have found most of my resources from NASP handouts and powerpoints. When I get to a roadblock and I am

trying to do what is best practice I initially go to the member exchange and try to find options from there. I hope that in my future placements I will continue to be involved in NASP as an organization and collaborate with other school psychologists to make the field better. I keep the Communique in my office for myself to look through and as a jumping off point for conversations with other colleagues.